



**Review: [Untitled]**

Reviewed Work(s):

*L'Empire des Sens* by Nagisa Oshima; Anatole Dauman  
Michael Silverman

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# Reviews

## L'EMPIRE DES SENS

Director: Nagisa Oshima. Producer: Anatole Dauman. Script: Oshima.  
Photography: Kenichi Okamoto. Editing: Keiichi Uraoka.

There is a relentlessness to the work of Nagisa Oshima, which in his best films (*Death by Hanging*, *The Man Who Left His Will on Film*) subjects any lyric impulse or random insight to the rigor of logical investigation. As the subject of his discourse most often has spectacular possibilities (a corpse refuses to die and interrogates its executioners, a boy is trained by his parents to be hit by automobiles for the purpose of collecting insurance) Oshima's project would seem to involve the narrowing of sensational and empathic response for the purpose of furthering ideological enquiry or, at least, posing social questions. His latest film, *L'Empire des Sens*, continues the project. Ostensibly, it can be seen as a fuck film; indeed, it is so explicit that it may never be shown in "respectable" art houses or at festivals subject to discreet censorship. Its spectacle inheres in the unremitting display of sexuality, so that an occasional exterior shot seems a lapse in concentration. As the film progresses, the director eliminates establishing shots as the lovers eliminate foreplay; simply, the penis is in the vagina, and the investigation continues. The lovers' pact is the unqualified prolongation of desire; and whereas in a romantic film (*Ugetsu Monogatari*, for example) we understand that desire may be kept alive as memory which nourishes one partner after the other's death, here a lapse into sleep or a soft penis signal a point of absolute termination. Oshima's persistent narrowing denies any romantic or metaphysical gesture the opportunity of replacing the physical fact.

In part this critique of romantic desire and its replacement by the strictly sexual is marked by a restriction and isolation from any social network which might impinge upon sexual activity, making complicated demands. Thus, the woman's objection to the man's wife may be seen as a mark of traditional jealousy, but also as a wish to deny the husband a context apart from the absolutely sexual.

She urges him to rape someone they chance upon and semi-accidentally knock down in the streets, and she watches in fascination while he screws a 68-year-old geisha. Within the limits of the strictly sexual she justifies her liaison with an elderly schoolteacher because it provides money for their pleasure; indeed, she becomes excited when in bed with the schoolteacher at the thought of similar

## U.S. CUSTOMS VS. THE ARTS

### Round 3

Following its interference with Cuban films (and the Justice Department's harassment of Tricontinental Films, which distributes many Cuban films in this country) the US Customs has recently directed illicit seizure against a film on "moral" grounds: it snatched a print of Oshima's *Empire of the Senses* (which had duly entered the country through Customs at the port of Los Angeles, after several festival screenings in Europe) away from the New York Film Festival. On November 9, a US District court called the Customs action "outrageous" and enjoined Customs from interfering with possession or exhibition of the film—which has been the subject of much serious attention elsewhere. This particular battle seems won: Festival ticketholders will now get to see the film, and perhaps it will be shown in theaters. But the war continues; Customs still retains powers to "detain" films on grounds of possible "obscenity"—a kind of *de facto* prior censorship which it would be unsound, indeed perhaps even "obscene," to continue entrusting to an agency with the vigilante tendencies of the US Customs. As Joanna Koch of the NY Festival put it, "We believe a mature public should make up its own mind about what films or other forms of art they wish, or do not wish, to see or hear, and it is not the place of the government to make these decisions for them."

pleasures with her lover. One of the film's first sexual images shows the man, Keichi, being carefully wrapped in an underdressing by his wife; she grows excited, and they make love out of camera range. Among the onlookers is Sada, the central female protagonist, later identified as a former prostitute by an old man who recalls that she was "always happy." When Sada first makes love to Keichi, it is more or less with the knowledge of everyone in the house. She is, after all, a servant; his wife will not allow him to visit geishas, and he needs casual distraction. When he is first inside her, he accepts a knock at the door as part of the normal economy of the household while Sada decorously feigns discomposure. Later they visit geishas together. An elaborate mock wedding ceremony is performed. The bride and groom make love in the presence of the geishas, who in turn initiate one of their novices in the uses of a huge porcelain dildo. To this point, Sada and Keichi are sanctioned by a complex erotic tradition and by the traditional familial authority of the husband. Though the mock-marriage of the couple theatricalizes this authority, they still arrange themselves within the world of the geishas which links itself to the daylight world through parody. However, their narrow insistence on the sexual act ultimately has no need but its own ceaselessly enacted gratification. They repair to a small room in a hotel.

Cut off from family and commerce, from a nation preparing for war (though traditional costumes are worn, we once glimpse a marching column of troops, and we are finally informed that the film is based on a famous incident of the thirties) desire for a time disguises its inevitable death by parodies of birth. Through fantasy the vagina becomes the territory of absolute sovereignty, the exerciser of the sexual imaginary. Sada's invitation to Keichi to dip their food in her orifice leads to the insertion of a hardboiled egg; it is totally ingested, expelled and consumed. She asks him to describe what it would be like to have his entire head in her womb. Ultimately, though, false births cannot satisfy or divert. Death is posited in the form of a silken kimono cord to be wrapped around the throat while orgasm is slowly achieved. He cannot bring himself to inflict pain; he has long since relinquished his imagination to her pleasure. The knife with which she had earlier threatened his genitals is no longer needed. On two occasions they use the cord, the second one bringing them close to their goal. Finally, on the last night, he cannot sustain the sign of their desire. He sleeps, she wakes him and tells him that she will strangle him; he looks at her closely, and sleeps again. Only after the strangling does she resort to the phallic knife, cutting off her dead lover's penis and testicles, and holding them to herself.

*Tatsuya  
Fuji and  
Eiko Matsuda  
in L'EMPIRE  
DES SENS*





While Oshima's film would seem to anatomize female desire, for once showing the male as the viewed object rather than the viewing subject, female desire is in fact reduced to the appropriation of the phallus. When they first make love in the nude she remarks on the softness of his skin; but though his body is genuinely beautiful, her entire attention is riveted to the genitals. She fondles the penis, strokes, sucks, grabs, threatens, bites, consumes. Desire is reductive and obsessional. The essentially masculine sexual code of possession is here reversed: with his usual dialectical skill, Oshima has demonstrated that the man's gaze may reach out to possess the woman and take her in, but that with all social conventions stripped away, the woman's anatomy enables her to take in, to contradict the power of the gaze. One can only argue that the sexual dynamic of the film is a special case (it was evidently seen as such by Japanese law) and that possession in any discussable sense takes place within a set of heavily overdetermined conventions of viewing and sexuality. A woman of "normal" appetites would seem necessarily beyond the reach of film-makers, since the codes of viewing and sexual behavior are derived from an essentially masculine symbolic order: either women are trapped inside a dominant system within which they are habitually subject to the gaze and "possession" of men; or, liberated from a passive role but still within the system of constraints, they assume the very role of oppressor, obsessively centering on the phallus and making of the man a prick in the same way men would make of a woman a cunt.

The film rigorously exposes the aim of possession: a placing of the other within a heavily restricted system of exchange, a construction of the object of desire as an enacting substitute for the fears of the self's own death. To say simply that I wish to look

at Garbo in *Camille*, to make my gaze complicitous in her suffering—and to acknowledge that I am supported in so doing by a system of viewing which puts her symbolically at my disposal—would still not account for the romantic extremity towards which possession points. Finally, the object of desire must die in order to insure the permanence of desire. This death is endlessly repeatable, constantly re-enforcible, and desire remains as a constantly affirmed element of the symbolic. I can watch *Camille* ten times, or *Gilda*, or a photograph of Marilyn Monroe. The immobility of the metaphorically dead object only confirms the symbolic power of the gaze.

Part of the preservation of desire involves the sanctioning of the gaze through complexity; the object symbolically possessed—whether the face of Garbo or *Camille* as a whole—ultimately sanctions my look or my words by construing itself as only partially accessible. The desired can thus never assuage me, I can never have enough. Godard's fascination with the woman as prostitute suggests that no matter how many times we may possess Nana in *Vivre Sa Vie*, something is shielded from us: thus the text projects a woman who "sells her body, but keeps her soul." This heavily overdetermined reservation, however, does not have as its chief aim the protection of the woman as woman but only serves to insure continued desire, keeps the object (woman, text, system) at least partially mystified. My gaze is called for, to the extent that the object seems incomplete without it; but the transaction thus completed must seem forever sterile and lacking full gratification. Several viewings make the text seem richer; knowledge of several films increases respect for the system. Even as I possess, I can solace myself that I am valorizing the object, and that this increases in desirable value the object itself.

In *L'Empire des Sens* the man's passivity renders him mysterious. As the object of desire he suggests depth of feeling which the woman, in the grip of obsession, cannot reach. At first his growing passivity seems intended to parallel the behavior prescribed for the traditional gentle lover of pillow books and poems; finally, though, he seems intent on preserving a mystery. Sada aska him why his penis is hard. "Your desire makes it hard," he replies. Thus he puts himself at her disposal, but keeps his thoughts to himself. He becomes the

instrument for her orgasms (though early in the film we see semen dripping from her body, we have little evidence as things go on whether he is coming or not); as she becomes interested in less and less, he suggests more and more that some part of himself is in reserve—this, too, is insured precisely by her desire; and his erection is made to signify this mystery, is seen as the readily possessible sign of a shielded interiority. This particular mystification of the male would seem to be one of Oshima's most dazzling reversals.

The severing of the penis and testicles after death, then, is an admission of desire's end, as well as a fetishizing of that desire's sign. Since the act is seen as pathetically insufficient, the mystery of desire has been preserved through death. We may suspect that the literal nature of possession in this instance permits the re-integration of the symbolic. As the text increasingly suggests itself as a portrayal of isolated and bizarre activity, we as audience are permitted a return to the world of the legally constituted, with its sanctions and proscriptions. In the realm of the symbolic the murderous intent of the gaze becomes sublimated, through a system of cultural supports, until its potency is that of a mere metaphor. Sada's behavior may now be seen as fully suspect (the gruesome close-ups and the distancing overhead shots enforce this) and dangerous, antisocial. The severing, the cut, ironically insures its alien character and permits the drawing of distinctions, returns us harmoniously to the relational world. We may wish to say that desire for the possession of images cannot surely involve such extremity. . . . Still, we may be drawn by this film to put into question such problems as the preservation in wish form of a sexual and scopophilic imaginary, the role played by death in the economy of desire and the residence of the code of possession within various mental and social activities, including watching and talking about this extremely desirable film.

—MICHAEL SILVERMAN

## NUMÉRO DEUX

To follow the career of Jean-Luc Godard has been to watch the long, fascinating process of bourgeois cinema's annihilation and the formation of a new revolutionary cinema (to use the words of Godard

himself). The turning point was *Weekend* (chronologically in sync with the events of May '68) which seemed to be showing us the total social destruction of Western civilization as we knew it. Left with literally nothing, it was necessary to rebuild from scratch, to recreate (re-educate, Godard might say). Hence he made *Le Gai Savoir*, in which two young Maoist semioticians endeavored to create a new system of communication, both verbal and visual. Six years later, Godard has made *Numéro Deux*, and it might well have been the film these two young people were trying to make.

*Numéro Deux* focuses on a middle-class working family, chronicling the interpersonal relationships of husband Pierre and wife Sandrine. The emphasis is on their sexual problems; much is made of Pierre's impotence and Sandrine's constipation. We also see the children and the grandparents. Godard imposes a political superstructure over the entire cluster of relationships, but it is not as blatant as in, say, *Tout Va Bien*. And of course, there is also a cinematic superstructure of visual technique: Godard as usual is preoccupied with the nature of the image. Put simply, it is the old story of form versus content, but never before have they been so well integrated.

Godard has said that the conflict between sound and image (form) is the cinematic metaphor of the sociopolitical conflict between what one sees and what one actually experiences (content). In such films as *Pravda* and *See You at Mao*, this theme of discontinuity has resulted in sometimes politically questionable but always aesthetically eloquent cinematic essays. Sound and image are at it again in *Numéro Deux*, and the battle, though sometimes obscure, is always fascinating, even poetic in a strange sort of way. For *Numéro Deux* is also an experiment in video, and video is the perfect vehicle for Godard's latest semiological meditation. Superimposition and other effects possible with video are employed, and not only are they fully integrated with the subject matter, but they occasionally erupt into sudden moments of pure beauty for beauty's sake; beauty, that is, in that special Godardian sense.

Take the opening "shot" for example. On the left there is a TV screen square flickering red light. On the right is another TV screen framing part of Pierre's face occasionally replaced by a comparable view of Sandrine's face. The rest of